



Construction of an intellectual identity by Maithil Brahmins during the age of Vidyapati

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the notion of a social group, that constructed an intellectual characteristics' identity, during Vidyapati's Mithila. The Maithili Brahmins, among these social groups, formed their distinctive identity for a long time. In the process, they determined the social norms in contemporary society. The paper also tries to analyse the state's attitude in this identity's creation process which permitted the Maithili Brahmin scholars, on the basis of their sacred texts, *Dharmasastras* (religious books), to regulate contemporary social order. Their works of literature, in Vidyapati's Mithila, reflect the formation of symmetry, for the validation of their identity and domination, between the challenges at the political and cultural levels. The paper, through the analysis of this literature, attempts to study the legitimacy of the Brahminical hierarchy and regulation of daily life in contemporary Mithila.

Keywords: Brahmin; Dharmasastra; Hindu-law; Kulinikarna; Mithila

1. Introduction

Regional history requires its understanding not only through the study of a particular geographical boundary but also through the socio-cultural and economic interdependence of the region and that too when a particular group of people creates a distinct identity within that region. The study of the region, more importantly, in such a condition, requires a focused approach towards its religious institutions and beliefs, economic and social structures, organised on a local basis, and political institutions. The identity and social formation of a particular region can also be understood by looking at it over a long period.

Geographically located in the North-eastern region of Bihar, Mithila, also known as Videha, Tirabhukti, Tirhut and Mithilanchal, is a tract of land lying between 25° 28' North Latitude and 84° 56' East Longitude (O'Malley 151 and Hunter et.al 318), and bounded by the Mahananda River in the east, the Ganges in the south, Gandaki River in the west and the foothills of the Nepalese Himalayas in the north. Comprised of North Bihar and the *terai* (lowland) region of Nepal, the region of Mithila, in medieval times, had formed a separate geographical and political entity having peculiar cultural traits (Juzjani 587-737 and Barani 193-237). The region of Mithila, for a long, has been considered a seat of Vedic and Upanishadic studies. The scriptures of ancient and medieval India present a well-documented and detailed description of the history of the region. The study of ancient texts helps us find the continued unabated tradition of scholarship in the region since the days of King Janaka. His court, filled with several intellectual figures, is best known for learned philosophical discussions (Eggeling 62 and Tagare 88).

2. Result and Discussion

The medieval Mithila saw the ushering of a new era in its political history when the Karnatas, accompanied by the Chalukyas during their northern expedition in the 11th century, established themselves as an independent power. Mithila, under Karnatas, resisted the military arms of Bengal and the Delhi Sultanate. The rulers of Bengal, Jaunpur,

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Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire always doubted the rulers of Mithila due to their geographical characteristics. Consequently, the rulers of Mithila, sometimes, according to the contemporary Indo-Persian literature, were punished as well as rewarded too by the rulers of Bengal, Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire (Thakur 4-5; Badayuni 348-49; and Ahmad 92-93). The rulers of Mithila, in such conditions, faced a lot of difficulties to save their authority. At one time when Gyasuddin Tughlaq, the then Delhi Sultan invaded Mithila in 1324, the king of Mithila, Hari Singh Dev, in spite of fighting the imperial army, fled to Nepal. And eventually, Mithila saw the end of the Karnata dynasty (Barani 236 and Husain 64). Mithila's political fate, after the fall of Tughlaqs, got closely associated with the rulers of Jaunpur and Bengal. Later, under the Mughals, this land came to be known as Tirhut which was an Important Sarkar of Bihar Subah (Fazl 156).

The Turkish invasions at Mithila, in the 14th century, created a political void over there. The Maithili Brahmins, exploiting this situation as a golden opportunity, assumed the leadership role in the cultural as well as political spheres of the region. The Turks, for their smooth administration in the territory, entered into an alliance with the Maithili Brahmins. In the process, a local Brahmin family known as the Oiniwar dynasty was given the responsibility to govern the land. The Mughals too, later, following the Turkish example, handed over the Tirhut's zamindari to another local Brahmin family called the Khandvalas. The Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals, in return for their favour to the Brahmin dynasties, were ensured by these dynasties the timely payment of land revenue to them. However, the Maithili Brahmins, taking help from other local rulers, tried to strengthen the traditional Brahminical social system which saw the emergence of a *Varna* (group or caste) state. The medieval Mithila was already maintaining a harsh Brahminical social order. However, the Maithili Brahmins took it as a challenge because they required the legitimacy of this new feature of the powerful political forces such as the Turks and the Mughals. The Maithili Brahmin dynasty, though its existence was dependent on the Turko-Afghan Sultan, had created new challenges in the social and political spheres. A Hindu king, politically dependent on the Turkish Sultan, faced the problem of legitimation. The Oiniwar kings, further, challenged the norms of *Dharmasastra* which prescribed that a king should have a Kshatriya origin. The newly established Oiniwar dynasty, therefore, found it necessary to readjust the established norms as per circumstances.

Chandeshwara Thakur, the most renowned Maithili *Nibandhakara* (essayist) who wrote under the patronage of Bhavasingh Simha, an Oiniwar king, in his *Rajnitiratnakara* (a jewel mine of politics), advocates for no caste-bar for a king (Thakur 3-4). He also denounces the essentiality of a ceremony of the sacrament of coronation for kingship. However, he, though quickly adjusting himself to the new changing political environments, sharply differed from many key issues prescribed in *Dharmasastra*. Chandeshwara Thakur, thus, through his writing, legitimized the state-sponsored enthronement of the rulers of the Oinvara and the Khandavala dynasties. Vidyapati, too, in the changed scenario, placed Ibrahim Shah Sharqi, the greatest Sharqui dynastic ruler of the Jaunpur Sultanate, next to God. Vidyapati, in praise of the king, called him intelligent, generous and a conqueror of the earth (Thakur 106-08). Further, Vidyapati, in his praise to the Sultan, called him of being capable of bestowing desired blessings on those paying adulation to him. The Maithili Brahmins, owing to the establishment of the Turkish political power in North India, went for necessary political, social and ideological adjustments for themselves. For example, we can take *Virudavali* (a panegyric) to see the author's praise of the beauty, valour, patience and magnificence of the Mughal Emperor, Shahjahan. We can, through contemporary Maithili literature, very well see the Brahmin poets and essayists trying to legitimise the rule of their patron kings. Jyotishwara Thakur, referring to the different skills of a competent king, talks, in detail, about eighty-four types of kingly qualities and the use of thirty-six types of weapons (Thakur 8-26). Presenting a vivid description of the court life and its decorum, he, in his book *Varna-Ratnakara* (a jewel mine of caste), has given a long list of administrative officers of the time (Thakur 8-9). Both Chandeshwar Thakur and Jyotishwara Thakur portray the country as a goddess and the king, its protector, who must fulfill his *Raajdharm* (royal duty). They also insisted on indivisible governance but it, under the kingship of the Turks and the Afghans, was practically not possible. However, they discussed the duties of *Karada* (a taxpayer) (Thakur 4).

Maithili Brahmins have written a plethora of digests and commentaries on *Smriti* (a book containing rules about the social practices of the *Varnas*). Besides presenting a detailed description of the different castes, on the basis of their profession, Jyotishwara Thakur, in his *Varna-Ratnakara*, has also discussed the social rules and regulations for different castes in the contemporary period (Thakur 84-85). Talking about the moral duties of the king and people, Vachaspati Mishra and Vardhamana Upadhyay, the celebrated writers of the period, have given guidance in their works. Their guidance also spread, through literary works, to other provinces mainly Bengal and Nepal. On the basis of *Dharmasastra* and *Dharmasutras*, Mishra, in his book *Vivad-Chintamani* (a fabulous gem of controversy), has shed a huge light on the appropriate solution for different crimes, penalties, property rights and partition, etc. Upadhyay is best known for his description of different penal codes for various crimes. He, in his *Dandaviveka* (Code of Punishment), also gives examples from the *Smritis* of Manu, Yajnavalkya, Vyasa, Gautama, Narada, Katyana, Vishnu, and others. The book classifies crimes into different categories and accordingly prescribes punishments too. He is considered to be the first *smritikara* (lawmaker) to talk about, with some relaxation, the property rights and conditions of women. Similarly,

Harihara Jha, in his *Suktimitavali* (an anthology of Sanskrit gnomic poetry), a book of historical importance, depicts the still neglected social life of the 16th and 17th century Mithila.

Now, it becomes more important to think of the need for reconstruction of the ancient Brahminical social and judicial system by the Maithili Brahmin scholars and that too when Buddhism and Jainism, the biggest enemies of Brahminism, had already disappeared, in the mid of the 13th century, from this region. A deep study of the nature of medieval Mithila unfolds lots of reasons behind this situation. First, the advent of this technology, under the centralised rule of the Turks, helped expand farming, building construction, the textile industry and trade. The then Mithila, being surrounded by rivers from three sides, heavily suffered from the disaster of the flood that barred the region from farming for almost five to six months. As a result, people were supposed to migrate, for employment, to another place. Second, Maithili Brahmins, after the fall of the Pala dynasty of Bengal, enjoyed the patronage of the Karnatas and the Senrulers, and, in turn, declared the rulers of having a Kshatriya origin. In this way, it can be said that both the rulers and the local Brahmins needed each other. The rulers needed the local Brahmins for legitimacy and the Brahmins, for patronage. Hence, the Maithili *smritikaras*, to stop the migration from Mithila, gave some relaxation to 'Vaishya' and 'Shudra' (the lowest two among the four *Varnas* prescribed in *Smritis*). We can also find the description of different sub-castes and their corresponding professions in contemporary texts such as *Grhasta-Ratnakara* (Thakur 113-167) and *Varna-Ratnakara*. The great Maithili essayists – Chandeshwar Thakur, Jyotishwara Thakur and Vachaspati Mishra – wrote about ideal kingship, nobility, trade, private property and royal property whereas the great Maithili poets – Vidyapati Thakur and Jagadhara – wrote about contemporary society and politics. So, the Maithili essayists, owing to the existence of a number of sub-castes in the medieval Mithila, tried to fit them within the traditional framework of the four *Varnas*.

Mithila, as we know, has been, from ancient times, a great centre of Sanskrit learning and literature and has kept that tradition alive even today. It is considered to have an unbroken tradition of philosophical and religious scholarship. Sanskrit learning into Mithila, liberally patronised by the Karnatas, the Oiniwar and the Khandavala dynasties, paved the way for the development of different branches of learning. However, the Buddhist and Jain scholars contributed, though indirectly, a lot to shaping the Maithili Brahmins' philosophical and literary traits. But, by the early medieval Mithila, these contesting, diverging and, sometimes, converging Buddhist and Jain philosophies faced, more often but prominent, an aggressive reaction from the Maithili Brahmin scholars. Briefly speaking, the Brahminical religion, in the period, saw a more intense dispute with Buddhism, not Jainism. The Maithili Brahminical philosophers established, under the defensive way of *Mimamsa School* (epistemology), three different sects such as Prabhakar Mishra's *Guru-Mata*, Kumaril Bhatt's *Bhatt-Mata* and Murari Mishra's *Mishra-Mata* (Jha 1-3) so that they could oppose Buddhism and Jainism. The eminent intellectual achievement of the region as well as its conflicts didn't go unnoticed. Observing this peculiarity of the land, AbulFazl said, "Tirhut has, from immemorial time, been a seat of Hindu learning" (Fazl 149-156).

In the medieval period, the age-long hierarchical division of society into four *Varnas*, several mixed castes and lower castes was persistent in the entire stretch of the region. However, the period also saw a fundamental change in its social structure. The institutions of castes and sub-castes, during the period, went more and more crystallised to guarantee social stability. In Mithila also, there were numerous castes and sub-castes which the Maithili scholars were trying to fit into the traditional four *varnas*. Both Chandeshwara Thakur and Vidyapati Thakur, in their respective works *Varna-Ratnakara* and *Likhnavali*, have mentioned several sub-castes of 'Vaisyas' and 'Sudras.' Though Mithila strictly followed the caste rules yet it, at the same time, also gave some relaxation to Brahmins. Chandeshwara Thakur, for example, in his *Grhasta-Ratnakara*, talks of Brahmins taking cooked or uncooked food from 'Sudras' and also doing agricultural work (Thakur 336-38). Further, many essayists and lawmakers of medieval Mithila approved 'Sudras' to study, along with the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*, other theologies. This all seems to be the result of the emergence of the Turks as new political authorities of the region.

Now, it becomes interesting to study the way these intellectuals, associated with various indigenous philosophies and learnings, presented the Mithila people with a social and spiritual platform. Islam, in the twelfth century, entered north India as a political power and changed, more or less, the pre-established regional social and political approaches. Islamic traditions, in this period, came closer, through Sufism and Persian scholars' folktales, to common Indians. Involving in enhancing their Brahminical philosophy and traditions, the contemporary Maithili intellectuals were unable to directly challenge, as they had earlier done with Buddhism, Islamic political authority and traditions. It was because the local patrons of the Brahmin intellectuals didn't suffer overthrow by the Turks. However, it shouldn't be inferred that the Maithili intellectuals easily got acquainted, at the social level, with such a new tradition. They, rather, continuously endeavoured to reconstruct, based on *Vedic* characteristics, the contemporary Maithili society of their ideals.

Besides, the fourteenth-century Maithili intellectuals, along with their patron rulers, imposed and modified some social laws of *RaktaShudhi-Prakrma* (purity of blood) alias *Kulinikarna* (patronymic) and *Panji-PrabandhVyavastha* (a book of genealogy encompassing Maithili Brahmins and Kayastha families). Both Brahmins and Kayasthas of the period had two

classes – first, *Kulinas* (high birth) and second, *Grihastha* (ordinary birth). The upper castes Brahmins and Kayastha were required to follow *Kulinikarna*. Later, Kshatriyas also got included in the system. It was very important to know *Utedh* (a kind of lore) to follow the *Panji-PrabandhVyavstha*. Brahmins, under this system, were divided into four categories – *Shotriya* (proficient and well versed in *Veda*), *Yogya* (eligible), *Panjibanddha* (registered) and *Jaibaras* (frustrated) (Jha 165). Similarly, Karna-Kayastha and Radhi-Kayastha, among Kayasthas, were supposed to be the most qualified and respected (Thakur 26). Brahmins and Kayasthas, in marriages, strictly followed *gotras* (phylum) and *mulas* (lineage) and also got *Vivah-Panji-Pramana* (Certificate of marriage) by *Panjikaras* (registrars). Marriage, for all castes, within the same caste group was encouraged. This system ensured marriages as per scripture's injunctions so that the law of *RaktaShudhi-Prakarma* could be maintained. The errant members faced ostracisation from their community or a lowering of their social rank. This system of marriage and social classification spread, very soon, from Mithila to the regions of Bengal and Orissa (Chaudhary 133-34). However, such type of system also created, among people, a sense of caste discrimination.

Buddhism and Jainism, because of the continuation of the harsh Brahminical rituals in the minds of the common people of different spiritual sects, couldn't get more success among the masses of the contemporary Mithila. Different Sufi sects like Chisti, Quadiriyah, Firdausi, Shattari and Madariya (Askari 74), apart from Shaivism, Saktism, Vaishnavism and other minor religious orders, were also present in the medieval Mithila, and gradually came closer to the philosophy of Buddhism and *Vedas*. However, Islam, because of the Turkish rulers' no-questioning approach to the Brahminical custom and social arrangements, didn't get a strong position in the region. It was rather limited to spreading the Sufi saints' spiritual discourses. However, all religions present in the medieval Mithila, because of the creation of a spiritual atmosphere by the philosophical debates of these religions, adopted, though partially, each other's religious activities and values. Buddhism, on the other hand, having almost zero patronage of local rulers, was disappearing from the region. All religious sects opened spiritual doors for all castes but couldn't fully control the rituals of Brahminical philosophy. However, the followers of different sects accepted and adopted some of the customs from each other. The Vaishnava sect, for example, showed considerable importance to the Basil plant because their saints claimed to get initiation after putting on Basil garlands (Thakur 8). Chandeshwara Thakur has also provided a detailed description of the contemporary Maithili people worshipping Vasudeva, in *Shukla paksha* (bright half of a month), with barley and sesame (Thakur 163-64). Vidyapati, taking inspiration from Vaishnava's love poetry, composed a lot of love poems based on Radha and Krishna's love stories. The beauty of Vidyapati's love poems was such enchanting that it made Chaitanya, a famous Vaishnava saint of Bengal, dance with pleasure. Vidyapati's love poems also made the Maithili words circulate in Bengal. In the course of time, many Mithila poets and storytellers started getting respect in Eastern India too.

3. Conclusion

This brief study suggests that Mithila has always been a centre of intellectual attainment and spiritual advancement led by Maithili Brahmins. Mithila, in the age of Vidyapati, was known for a considerable contribution to various branches of education, science and literature. One can also find, going through the history of Mithila, an unabated tradition of scholarship since the days of Janaka, a legendary king known for his wisdom. His court was filled with many intellectual figures who remained engaged in learned philosophical discussions. Janaka's Mithila was used to convene philosophical gatherings. Mithila, in the age of Vidyapati, with Maithili Brahmin intellectuals at the helm of affairs, significantly contributed to the realm of philosophy and justice to make its cultural edifice rest on it. It is also to be noted that it was the complex texture of the Maithili philosophy, developed by different Brahmin intellectuals of the period, that attracted several intellectuals even from outside Mithila.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

I do, hereby, solemnly declare that this is my original research work. It has neither been sent anywhere for publication nor for consideration. It has followed and maintained all ethical standards and it has not been funded by any agency or organization.

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